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ABSTRACT

This study examined the short-term association between daily parental job stress and subsequent patterns of interaction between parent and child. Subjects were 30 mothers each with a preschool child between the ages of 3 and 5 years. Mothers were employed in a variety of white-collar occupations. For 5 consecutive days, mothers completed a questionnaire concerning their job stress during the work day. Two occupational conditions, namely, perceived work load and qualiaty of social interaction with coworkers and supervisors, were measured. Each evening, mothers completed another questionnaire assessing aversiveness and withdrawal during their interactions with their children that evening. Results indicated that there was no increase in aversiveness after high stress days at work. There was a relation between daily work load and parent-child withdrawal, but no relation between distressing social interactions and parent-child withdrawal. Eight references are cited. (BC)

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Mothers Also Withdraw from Parent-Child Interaction as a Short-Term Response to Increased Load at Work

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Research evidence suggests that there is a significant relation between parents' chronic exposure to stress at work and generally less satisfying parent-child relationships (Repetti, 1987). Findings from several studies, using between-subjects designs, are consistent with Hoffman's (1986) suggestion that when feelings of frustration and anger are generated at work, they may be expressed in the form of power assertion and more punitive behavior with children. For example, Grossman, Pollack & Golding (1988) found that fathers who were relatively less satisfied with their careers were also less tolerant of their 5 year-old's distress. In another study, Galambos & Almeida (1989) conducted a path analysis on data collected over a 12-month period. They found that a father's psychological well-being mediated the relation between work strains and increased conflict with an adolescent child. In addition, I recently found that male air traffic controllers who worked on teams with a conflictual and non-supportive social climate reported patterns of interaction with a preschool-age child that were characterized by a less positive and a more negative emotional tone (Repetti, 1990). In sum, the available evidence suggests that parents may be at an increased risk for a more aversive relationship with their child if they are chronically exposed to stressful and unsatisfying occupational conditions.

Parental withdrawal, including diminished emotional responsiveness, appears to be another common parental response to chronically unsatisfying conditions at work. For example, Piotrkowski and Katz (1983) found that

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mothers who reported less positive moods at work were described as less interpersonally available by their daughters. Grossman and colleagues (1988) found that, in addition to being less tolerant, fathers who were relatively less satisfied with their careers also displayed less warmth, attention and responsiveness during interactions with their children.

I'd like to call your attention to an important characteristic of the large majority of studies in this field. Whether through the use of cross-sectional or longitudinal designs, the question of how stress at work affects parental behavior has typically been framed in terms of the long-term consequences of chronically stressful conditions in the work environment. An alternative approach focuses on the short-term changes in parent behavior that are associated with daily variability in job stressors. I believe that information about the short-term effects of exposure to stressors will add to researchers' understanding of the processes underlying the consequences of job stress. Short-term changes in parent behavior are perhaps best addressed through a within-subjects design that removes the effects of stable individual differences.

Within-subject change in parent behavior has been considered in two recent daily-diary studies examining the immediate effects that day-to-day fluctuations in job stress have on a parent's behavior. Both studies tested the hypothesis that there would be a short-term association between stress at work and more aversive parent-child interactions. However, neither study found any evidence for this short-term effect of parental job stress. In the daily diary study reported by Nial Bolger and his colleagues (1989), neither overloads nor arguments at work were associated with a significant increase in parent-child arguments on the same day. Similarly, in the air traffic

controller study mentioned earlier, I also failed to find any evidence of more negatively toned father-child interactions and increased use of disclipline on workdays in which there was greater workload and more distressing social interactions at work (Repetti, 1990).

In contrast to the aversiveness data, however, I found that a day at work characterized by high workload or negative social interactions with coworkers and supervisors was followed by greater withdrawal from parent-child interaction. After stressful days at work, these air-traffic-controller fathers were less involved with their children both in a positive and helpful manner (such as helping with homework) and as disciplinarians (less reminding, yelling, and punishing). There was also less negative emotion expressed during father-child interactions (Repetti, 1990).

To summarize, the available data suggest both similarities (with regard to parental withdrawal) and differences (with regard to increased aversiveness) between the short-term and long-term processes that link work and the family.

The Present Study

The present study was designed to provide a more detailed examination of the short-term association between daily parental job stress and subsequent patterns of parent-child interaction. It examines the within-subject association between (a) day-to-day fluctuations in parents' perceived job stress and (b) daily changes in parent-child interaction, with regard to levels of aversiveness and parental withdrawal. Parent-child interaction was assessed over five days by parents' daily reports and by videotapes of daily 10-minute parent-child play sessions. Today I will only be discussing the

parent-report measures of parent-child interaction.

The participants were 30 mother-child dyads. Each target child is a preschooler (3-5 years) enrolled in one of four worksite childcare centers in New York and New Jersey. The mothers were employed in a wide variety of white-collar occupations. Almost half were employees of the federal government; the rest worked either in a medical center or for a large private corporation.' The majority had at least some college education and average family income was between $30,000 - $40,000. About half of the mothers were White and half were Black or Hispanic. Eighty-six percent had at least one other child living at home.

The study uses a within-subject design with repeated measures over five consecutive days (Monday-Friday). Each day, before retrieving their child at the daycare center, parents completed measures of their exposure to job stressors (work overload and distressing interactions with coworkers and supervisors) that day. Later each evening they completed another questionnaire assessing aversiveness and withdrawal during parent-child interactions that occurred that evening. The study improves upon previous research by separating the assessments of daily job stressors and daily parent-child interaction. In the existing daily-report studies parents rated stress at work and parent-child interactions once each day, on the same questionnaire. Therefore, parents' ratings of daily job stress may have been contaminated by their emotional reaction to the child. To avoid that problem, perceived job stressors in this study were assessed at the end of the each workday, before parents had been reunited with their children. Later that evening, after the target child had gone to bed, parents rated interactions that had occured after the parent-child reunion at the daycare center.

Measures

Daily Job Stressors. On each of the five days parents described two occupational conditions, perceived workload and the quality of social interaction with coworkers and supervisors. All of the measures of daily job stress were based on measures used in the air traffic controller study. Subjects used 4-point response scales to rate the accuracy of a series of statements describing conditions at work that day. There were two factor-

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Insert Table 1 about here.

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based measures of daily workload. Busy Day is a five-item subjective rating of the amount and pace of workload that day (alpha = .87) (e.g., "There were more demands on my time than usual," "I felt like a barely had a chance to breathe."). Preferred Working Conditions is a three-item scale measuring the degree to which the respondent preferred that day's workload over a heavier or lighter load (alpha = .75) (e.g., "It was the kind of workload I would like to have every day at work.").

There was one measure of daily social experiences at work. Negative Social Interaction at Work (alpha = .86) is a 32-item scale in which respondents use 16 adjectives to provide separate ratings of how they felt during interactions (a) with coworkers and (b) with supervisors each day (e.g., feeling respected, appreciated, tense, annoyed, resentful). Ratings of interactions with coworkers and supervisors were combined into a single score. High scores indicate that more negative and less positive feelings were experienced during interactions at work that day.

Daily Parent-Child Interaction. Each evening mothers completed a

questionnaire describing their interactions with the target child between the time she was reunited with the child at the end of her workday and the time the child went to bed. The questionnaire focused on the two aspects of parent-child interaction that I discussed earlier, aversiveness and withdrawal. There were two types of item wording included on the questionnaire. Half of the items asked mothers to compare this evening to a typical evening, and the other half of the items required a simple "true" or "false" response. A factor analysis of all of the items resulted in two factor-based scales: Daily Parent-Child Aversiveness and Daily Parent-Child Withdrawal.

Results

Data Analysis

Multiple regression analysis was used to assess the association between daily occupational stressors and mother-child interaction. First, all between-subjects variance (both effects and errors) was controlled by a set of dummy variables, one for each mother. Because all variance due to person factors or individual differences is removed by the dummy variables, the regression model controls for each mother's tendency to respond to the parent-child interaction measures in a particular way (i.e. her overall level of aversiveness or withdrawal). Once the set of dummy variables has been entered, the regression model tests daily job conditions as determinants of day-to-day fluctuations in the mother's behavior after work.

Parent-Child Aversiveness as an Outcome of Daily Job Stress

Recall that several studies have found an association between chronic exposure to job stress and overall levels of parent-child aversiveness on a between-subjects basis. In this study the interest is in a within-subject

association between daily fluctuations in job conditions and day-to-day changes in the parent's behavior. The two existing daily-report studies failed to find a significant within-subjects association between daily job stress and aversiveness. Here I was able to consider the effects that two types of daily job stressors have on day-to-day fluctuations in the aversiveness of mother-child interaction. Daily Parent-Child Aversiveness

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Insert Table 2 about here.

(alpha = .83) is a 9-item scale describing the parent's use of discipline and coercive patterns of parent-child interaction (e.g.s., "My child did not obey me until I kept after him/her," "I yelled at my child," "Compared to a typical evening, tonight my child needed (more/less) reminding to do something"). The next table reports the results of multiple regressions testing the bivariate relation between each measure of daily job stress and parent-child

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Insert Table 3 about here.

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aversiveness. None of the beta coefficients for the daily job stress predictor variables approached statistical significance. Consistent with the two earlier studies, there was no evidence of an increase in aversiveness after high stress days at work.

The difference between the results of studies conducted at a between-subjects level and those investigating a within-subjects association are provocative. Based on the available data, there does not appear to be a direct spillover of negative feelings resulting from stress at work to

negative feelings expressed immediately after, during parent-child interactions. In contrast to the short-term findings, between-subjects studies of stable patterns of work-family linkages support a spillover model. This may suggest that, over time, the cumulative effects of chronic exposure to job stress day after day result in a more aversive parent-child relationship marked by less tolerance and increased conflict. However, on a daily basis, most parents may be able to control their impatience and suppress their aggressive impulses despite a temporary or short-term increase in job stressors such as overload or distressing social experiences at work.

Parent-Child Withdrawal as an Outcome of Daily Job Stress

In the air traffic controller study, I found that a short-term increase in parental job stress was associated not with more aversiveness but with greater withdrawal from the child later in the evening. As mentioned earlier, this short-term effect of job stress is consistent with findings from between-subjects studies indicating that parents who experience their jobs as unsatisfying appear to be less interpersonally available, less attentive, and less responsive with their children.

In the present study I considered the effects that the two types of daily job stressors have on day-to-day fluctuations in maternal withdrawal. (Refer back to Table 2.) Daily Parent-Child Withdrawal (alpha = .90) is a 14-item scale assessing behavioral and emotional involvement with the child (e.g.s., "I was too tired to interact much with my child," "Compared to a typical evening, tonight I spent (more/less) time talking with my child," "Compared to a typical evening, tonight I felt (more/less) responsive to my child"). The next table reports the results of multiple regressions testing the bivariate relation between each measure of daily job stress and mother-child withdrawal.

Insert Table 4 about here.

Although there was not a significant association between distressing social interactions at work and withdrawal, there was a significant association between one of the measures of daily workload, Busy Day, and parent-child withdrawal. This indicates that on evenings after more demanding workdays the mothers reported less playing, talking, and laughing with their child, less involvement with the child's activities and games, and less interest in what the child had to say. Additional analyses suggest that the effect of workload on withdrawal may be mediated by the mother's mood.

To summarize, in the short-run, social withdrawal, not expressions of anger and intolerance, appears to be the most common parental response to stress at work. As I have discussed elsewhere, I believe that social withdrawal and individual self-focused attention may reflect a coping process aimed at helping an aroused individual return to a baseline emotional and physiological state (Repetti, in press).

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Table 1

Measures of Daily Job Stress

	Number of Items	Alpha	Sample Items
Workload Scales			
Busy Day	5	.87	"There were more demands on my time than usual."
Preferred Conditions	3	.75	"It was the kind of workload I would like to have everyday at work."
Social Interaction Scale			
Negative Social Interaction at Work	32	.86	"How I felt during interactions with coworkers and supervisors today... respected/appreciated/ tense/annoyed"

Table 2

Measures of Daily Parent-Child Interaction

	Number of Items	Alpha	Sample Items
Daily Par-Child Withdrawal	14	.90	"I was too tired to interact much with my child." (true/false) "Compared to a typical evening, tonight I spent (more/less) time talking with my child." "Compared to a typical evening, tonight I felt (more/less) responsive to my child."
Daily Par-Child Aversiveness	9	.83	"My child did not obey me until I kept after him/her." (true/false) "I yelled at my child." (true/false) "Compared to a typical evening, tonight my child needed (more/less) reminding to do something."

Table 3

Results of Multiple Regressions Predicting Daily Fluctuations in Parent-Child Aversiveness From Day-to-Day Changes in Two Job Stressors

	Beta[a]
Daily Workload	
Busy Day	.11 (ns)
Preferred Conditions	.06 (ns)
Daily Social Interaction	
Negative Social Interaction at Work	-.06 (ns)

[a] Standardized Beta

Note: N = 132-135 days of data from 30 mothers

Table 4

Results of Multiple Regressions Predicting Daily Fluctuations in Parent-Child Withdrawal From Day-to-Day Changes in Two Job Stressors

	B[a]
Daily Workload	
Busy Day	.23 *
Preferred Conditions	-.06
Daily Social Interaction	
Negative Social Interaction at Work	-.15

* $p \leq .05$

[a] Standardized Beta

Note: N = 132-135 days of data from 30 mothers